



Ohio Speaker Cliff Rosenberger

One of youngest legislative leaders in state's history seeks institutional shift that emphasizes long-term thinking and goals

by Laura Tomaka (ltomaka@csg.org)

Seven years ago, Cliff Rosenberger was approached about running for a seat in the Ohio House of Representatives. He flatly turned down the suggestion.

"I'm a behind-the-scenes guy," Rosenberger says now about his thinking at the time. "I didn't think my getting out and doing that would be a benefit."

But fast-forward to today, and he not only finds himself in the House, but as its leader.

When he became speaker at age 33, Rosenberger had already packed an impressive list of accomplishments and experiences into a very young career — service in the Air National Guard and U.S. Air Force, work in the White House under President George W. Bush, and political events coordinator for presidential candidate Mitt Romney in 2008.

His transition from "behind-the-scenes guy" to speaker began while working as a special assistant to then-U.S. Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne. It happened while at an event with Kempthorne nearly 2,000 miles away from his home in southwest Ohio.

"A news story came on talking about my hometown of Wilmington and how 10,000 jobs were going to be lost," Rosenberger says.

The shipping company DHL Express was pulling out of the area — "a catastrophic event," in the words of the town's mayor. Not long after that announcement, Rosenberger's mother was laid off from her job.

"At that point, I decided to go home," Rosenberger says. "So I packed up from Washington and moved back home and spent the next two years getting involved and running for state representative."

Public service of some kind has long interested Rosenberger, in part because of his family's military background. His father and grandfather had served in the Army National Guard, and when it came time to think about his future and how to pay for college, Rosenberger chose the Air National Guard.

"[It was] an option to not only put myself through college," he recalls, "but an opportunity to serve my nation."

As a legislator, his support of the Ohio National Guard earned him the Major General Charles Dick Award for legislative excellence. Rosenberger also remains committed to the goal that helped bring him home and to the legislature in the first place: improving the economic competitiveness of his local district and the entire state.

Now in his third term, Rosenberger, a Republican, is the third-youngest House speaker in the state's history. He was elected to this top leadership spot on the heels of his party's having reached a historic

high of 65 seats in the 99-seat chamber. This is the largest majority held by one party since 1967, when the chamber was reduced from 137 seats.

CSG Midwest recently interviewed Rosenberger about his legislative career, his leadership challenges, and his desire to create a long-term vision for the state of Ohio.

Here are excerpts from that interview.

Q: How has your military and White House experience contributed to your leadership style?

A: Military-wise, you get taught a lot of things about structure and chain of command and how to communicate effectively. I think a lot of those traits came from my experience. You get taught natural leadership roles [in the military].

But I also had the opportunity to learn from a lot of folks in politics — most importantly, Dirk Kempthorne. Being able to work under him for close to a year was a great experience.

I saw how you always want to make sure you take care of your staff and make sure you're always thanking the men and women who are working with you — and not "for" you, I stress. You're always in a team environment, and I think that was an important leadership trait that came from my experience not only in the military, but from learning from people like Dirk Kempthorne.

Q: What are some of the big challenges of leading a historically large majority in the Ohio House?

A: Keeping [members] together and moving all in the same direction is a tough challenge, but it can be overcome. I think we've done a pretty good job at it by communicating with them and working with them and hearing what they are passionate about.

At the end of the day, you have to remember that you are elected speaker because of those members, and you have to listen to them and visit with them — and not only the Republican caucus, but the Democratic caucus as well.

Q: You've focused quite a bit on developing a 2020 plan for Ohio. Why is that such a priority?

A: When I came in as speaker, I said, "We have to build a longer-term vision and longer-term mission for what we are going to do here in Ohio." That is what we've really focused on. We're not just going to

Bio-sketch of Ohio House Speaker Cliff Rosenberger

- ✓ first elected to Ohio House of Representatives in 2010
- ✓ elected speaker of House by peers in 2014; at age 33, became third-youngest speaker in state history
- ✓ U.S. Air Force veteran
- ✓ worked in the White House and on a presidential campaign (Mitt Romney's 2008 run)
- ✓ served as special assistant to the U.S. secretary of the interior

say [certain bills] are priorities. We are going to switch this up. We are going to create an Ohio 2020 plan.

If you look at Ohio as a stool, with Ohio [being] the top of that stool, what are the four legs or pillars that make it stable and sturdy? For us that was competitiveness, energy, education and health care. And then we sat down and said, "What are the data drivers [in those four areas] that we want to continue to improve and start focusing our mission and our messaging on?"

For example, we know that we want to increase graduation rates and decrease dropout rates, so what is the path to get there? Those are the things that we are going to focus on; we're going to do it holistically with long-term thinking.

Q: How has that approach driven budget discussions in Columbus?

A: The governor proposed the budget with some major tax plans in it, and we said: "No, hold on, we're not going to do that yet, but we're going to set up a 2020 tax commission that gives the Senate and House perspective, along with the governor's [budget] director and the tax commissioner. Let's work together to get a long-term tax policy for our state."

For education funding, we've done the same. We've created the joint educational oversight committee that will constantly look at education funding in the state of Ohio.

Q: With term limits, you will be able to serve in the House for just one more term. With the short time you have left, what mark would you like to leave on the Ohio General Assembly?

A: My philosophy is that you have a little amount of time to make a huge difference in other people's lives. So I dedicate my entire time to thinking about how I can improve the state of Ohio and the quality of life, especially for my district and the families I represent. At the end of the day, I hope people say, "He communicated effectively, he listened, and he set a long-term vision for how we should start to think about the future." ★

"When I came in as speaker, I said, 'We have to build a longer-term vision and longer-term mission for what we are going to do here in Ohio.'"